

The Instructional Core

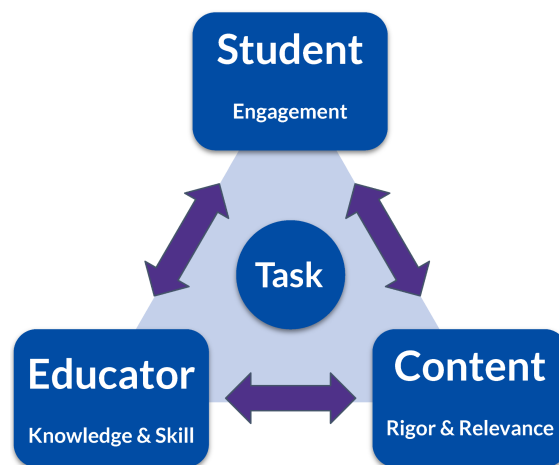
“Over the course of my career, and I am sure for many of you here, we’ve seen education policy veer away from improving, what Elmore, Cohen, and Ball refer to as, **the instructional core**. We have seen shiny silver bullets from the federal government promising to ‘fix’ education. We’ve seen big initiatives with clever names that promise everything, only to fade away after the sense of urgency is over. That’s not what this Administration is about. This Administration is about substance, not sensationalism in education. It’s about real solutions to complex issues, informed by real experience -- with **an unrelenting focus on the instructional core**.”

~ United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, 2023

The instructional core refers to the dynamic relationship between students, the classroom educator, and the content that is to be taught and learned. It is the relationship between these three things, not the qualities of any one of them by themselves that determines the nature of instructional practice.

Elmore's Instructional Core contends, There are only three ways to improve student learning at scale:

1. Raise the level of content that students are taught.
2. Increase the teachers' skill & knowledge that they bring to teaching of that content
3. Increase the level of students' active learning (engagement) of the content.



For any positive impact on student learning to take place, changes in any single element of the instructional core must be accompanied by corresponding changes in the other two elements. If we're not doing one of these three things, we're not improving teaching and learning - everything else is instrumental (from City, Elizabeth A., Elmore, R., Fiarman, S., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education*. Harvard Educational Publishing Group).

Improving the Instructional Core

taken from [Portland Public Schools](#)

Within their book, *Instructional Rounds in Education*, Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel outline seven principles of the Instructional Core:

Principle One: Defining the Instructional Core

There are only three ways to improve student learning at scale:

1. Raise the **level of content** that students are taught.
2. Increase the **teachers' skill & knowledge** that they bring to teaching of that content
3. Increase the **level of students' active learning** (engagement) of the content

The level of content, skill and knowledge of teachers, and level of student engagement define a school's instructional core.

Professional development only works to increase student learning if it influences what teachers **do** and if its effect lies in the areas of principle one. Administrators' "instructional leadership" is only impactful to the degree that it influences the level of work in classrooms, the knowledge and skills of teachers, and the level of active learning by students.

Principle Two: Change One Part of the Core, Change All Three

For any positive impact on student learning to take place, changes in any single element of the instructional core must be accompanied by corresponding changes in the other two elements. Raising the level of learning expectation and content would have to be accompanied by development of the teachers' skill level in teaching the new content. Then, too, thoughtful practices to extend student engagement with the new content would have to be put in place. Elmore finds that we often spend too much time worrying about **what** we are teaching and **how** it is being taught, and not enough focus on **whether** students are interested in, engaged in, and able to explain their thinking about what adults are trying to teach.

Principle Three: If You Can't See it in the Core, it Isn't There

Here the central idea is the **academic task**. Often through curriculum mapping and common assessment schedules we think all students are getting the same instruction, but Elmore finds that while curriculum and assessments may be common what different teachers expect of their students, variance in the skill with which the teachers deliver the curriculum, and the varying levels in which students were actively involved (not just "doing" what they are given but digesting it, making connections and new applications to deepen and extend knowledge) produce significant differences in student learning.

Principle Four: Task Predicts Performance

What predicts performance is not what teachers do, but what the students are actually doing. Students must know **what** they are expected to do, but also **how** they are expected to do it, and **what knowledge and skills they need** to learn how to do it well. It is also vital to have students know **why** they should want to do the work. It should have value and meaning to the student.

Principle Five: Real Accountability is in the Tasks

Better assessments will not necessarily translate to better teaching and learning. Educators need to attend to ensuring that students are indeed doing what they need to do to get the desired learning results at the classroom and school level. It is essential that educators work on the observation and analysis of teaching practice and watch students (not just see what they are assigned to do, but what they are actually doing). Elmore calls for consistent, well monitored efforts to create a strong, visible, transparent common culture of instructional practice. Inconsistent pockets of excellence don't produce high levels of learning at scale.

Principle Six: Learn by Doing the Work

Elmore warns that we learning by doing the work, not by telling other people to do the work, not by having done the work at some time in the past, not by hiring experts who can act as proxies for our knowledge about how to do the work*. He advocates "instructional rounds" (groups observing one another, processing together, sharing and learning from one another's experience and practice). Elmore also urges us to engage in sustained description and analysis (to endeavor to understand practice and its impact on learning) before engaging in judgment and evaluation.

Principle Seven: Description Before Analysis; Analysis Before Prediction; Prediction Before Evaluation

Elmore urges us to develop a “common culture of instruction” expressed through a common set of understandings about practice and a common language to use in describing what is going on in classrooms. He defines analysis as the ability to identify and group observations in agreed upon categories of practice (CSTPs, Bloom’s, etc.). Prediction is using the evidence of an observation and analysis of practice to make arguments about expected student learning. Elmore urges supervisors endeavoring to create a powerful shared culture of instructional practice to act as if they don’t know in order to learn what they need to know. Then, they can honestly and openly observe, analyze, predict, and more accurately and fairly evaluate.

Summary

Finally, Elmore urges us to do less with greater focus. Most low-performing schools don’t need more programs, or even more resources. They need a more powerful, coherent culture of instructional practice.

Elmore states that we learn to do the work by doing the work, not by making more policies about the work, not by spending money on the next new idea about the work, not by asking people to do what they do not know how to do and pretending they do, and not by claiming that things are getting better when one part of the distribution is improving while other parts are staying the same or getting worse. He finds that the work lies in the face-to-face interactions among people responsible for student learning around the work, in the presence of the work.

References & Additional Resources

- [Public Education Leadership Project Coherence Framework](#)
- City, Elizabeth A., et al. *Instructional Rounds in Education: a Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*. Harvard Education Press, 2014.
- [I Thought School Autonomy was the Silver Bullet for Improvement. I was Wrong-ish](#)
- [The Instructional Core](#)